IN THE TOWN OF BERDICHEV

VAVILOVA'S face was dark and weather-beaten, and it was odd to see it blush.

"Why are you laughing?" she said finally. "It's all so stupid."

Kozyrev took the paper from the table, looked at it, and, shaking his head, burst out laughing again.

"No, it's just too ridiculous," he said through his laughter. "Application for leave... from the commissar of the First Battalion... for forty days for reasons of pregnancy." Then he turned serious. "So what should I do? Who's going to take your place? Perelmuter from the Divisional Political Section?"

"Perelmuter's a sound Communist," said Vavilova.

"You're all sound Communists," said Kozyrev. Lowering his voice, as though he were talking about something shameful, he asked, "Is it due soon, Klavdiya?"

"Yes," said Vavilova. She took off her sheepskin hat and wiped the sweat from her brow.

"I'd have got rid of it," she said in her deep voice, "but I wasn't quick enough. You know what it was like—down by Grubeshov there were three whole months when I was hardly out of the saddle. And when I got to the hospital, the doctor said no." She screwed up her nose, as if about to cry. "I even threatened the bastard with my Mauser," she went on, "but he still wouldn't do anything. He said it was too late."

She left the room. Kozyrev went on staring at her application. "Well, well, well," he said to himself. "Who'd have thought it? She

hardly seems like a woman at all. Always with her Mauser, always in leather trousers. She's led the battalion into the attack any number of times. She doesn't even have the voice of a woman . . . But it seems you can't fight Nature . . ."

And for some reason he felt hurt, and a little sad.

He wrote on the application, "The bearer . . ." And he sat there and frowned, irresolutely circling his pen nib over the paper. How should he word it? Eventually he went on: "to be granted forty days of leave from the present date . . ." He stopped to think, added "for reasons of health," then inserted the word "female," and then, with an oath, deleted the word "female."

"Fine comrades *they* make!" he said, and called his orderly. "Heard about our Vavilova?" he asked loudly and angrily. "Who'd have thought it!"

"Yes," said the orderly. He shook his head and spat.

Together they damned Vavilova and all other women. After a few dirty jokes and a little laughter, Kozyrev called for his chief of staff and said to him, "You must go around tomorrow, I suppose. Find out where she wants to have it—in a hospital or in a billet—and make sure everything's generally all right."

The two men then sat there till morning, poring over the one-inch-to-a-mile map and jabbing their fingers at it. The Poles were advancing.

A room was requisitioned for Vavilova. The little house was in the Yatki—as the marketplace was called—and it belonged to Haim-Abram Leibovich-Magazanik, known to his neighbors and even his own wife as Haim Tuter, that is, Haim the Tatar.

Vavilova's arrival caused an uproar. She was brought there by a clerk from the Communal Department, a thin boy wearing a leather jacket and a pointed Budyonny helmet. Magazanik cursed him in Yiddish; the clerk shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

Magazanik then switched to Russian. "The cheek of these snotty little bastards!" he shouted to Vavilova, apparently expecting her to share his indignation. "Whose clever idea was this? As if there weren't a single bourgeois left in the whole town! As if there weren't

a single room left for the Soviet authorities except where Magazanik lives! As if there weren't a spare room anywhere except one belonging to a worker with seven children! What about Litvak the grocer? What about Khodorov the cloth maker? What about Ashkenazy, our number-one millionaire?"

Magazanik's children were standing around them in a circle—seven curly-headed angels in ragged clothes, all watching Vavilova through eyes black as night. She was as big as a house, she was twice the height of their father. All this was frightening and funny and very interesting indeed.

In the end Magazanik was pushed out of the way, and Vavilova went through to her room.

From the sideboard, from the chairs with gaping holes and sagging seats, from bedclothes now as flat and dark and flaccid as the breasts of the old women who had once received these blankets as part of their wedding dowries, there came such an overpowering smell of human life that Vavilova found herself taking a deep breath, as if about to dive deep into a pond.

That night she was unable to sleep. Behind the partition wall—as if they formed a complete orchestra, with everything from high-pitched flutes and violins to the low drone of the double bass—the Magazanik family was snoring. The heaviness of the summer night, the dense smells—everything seemed to be stifling her.

There was nothing the room did not smell of.

Paraffin, garlic, sweat, fried goose fat, unwashed linen—the smell of human life, of human habitation.

Now and then she touched her swollen, ripening belly; the living being there inside her was kicking and moving about.

For many months, honorably and obstinately, she had struggled against this being. She had jumped down heavily from her horse. During voluntary working Saturdays in the towns she had heaved huge pine logs about with silent fury. In villages she had drunk every kind of herbal potion and infusion. In bathhouses, she had scalded herself until she broke out in blisters. And she had demanded so much iodine from the regimental pharmacy that the

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medical assistant had been on the point of penning a complaint to the brigade medical department.

But the child had obstinately gone on growing, making it hard for her to move, making it hard for her to ride. She had felt nauseous. She had vomited. She had felt dragged down, dragged toward the earth.

At first she had blamed everything on *him*—on the sad, taciturn man who had proved stronger than her and had found a way through her thick leather jacket and the coarse cloth of her tunic and into her woman's heart. She had remembered him at the head of his men, leading them at a run across a small and terrifyingly simple wooden bridge. There had been a burst of Polish machine-gun fire—and it was as if he had vanished. An empty greatcoat had flung up its arms, fallen, and then hung there over the stream.

She had galloped over him on her maddened stallion and, behind her, as if pushing her on, the battalion had hurtled forward.

What had remained was *it*. It, now, was to blame for everything. And Vavilova was lying there defeated, while *it* kicked its little hoofs victoriously. It was living inside her.

Before Magazanik went out to work in the morning, when his wife was serving him breakfast and at the same time trying to drive away the flies, the children, and the cat, he said quietly, with a sideways glance at the wall of the requisitioned room, "Give her some tea—damn her!"

It was as though he were bathing in the sunlit pillars of dust, in all the smells and sounds—the cries of the children, the mewing of the cat, the muttering of the samovar. He had no wish to go off to the workshop. He loved his wife, his children, and his old mother; he loved his home.

Sighing, he went on his way, and there remained in the house only women and children.

The cauldron of the Yatki went on bubbling all through the day. Peasant men traded birch logs as white as chalk; peasant women rustled strings of onions; old Jewish women sat above downy hillocks of geese tied together by their legs. Every now and then a seller

would pluck from one of these splendid white flowers a living petal with a snaking, twisting neck—and the buyer would blow on the tender down between its legs and feel the fat that showed yellow beneath the soft warm skin.

Dark-legged lasses in colorful kerchiefs carried tall red pots brimming with wild strawberries; as if about to run away, they cast frightened looks at the buyers. People on carts sold golden, sweating balls of butter wrapped in plump burdock leaves.

A blind beggar with the white beard of a wizard was stretching out his hands and weeping tragically and imploringly, but no one was touched by his terrible grief. Everyone passed by indifferently. One woman, tearing the very smallest onion off her string, threw it into the old man's tin bowl. He felt it, stopped praying, and said angrily, "May your children be as generous to you in your old age!" And he again began intoning a prayer as ancient as the Jewish nation.

People bought and sold, poked and prodded, raising their eyes as if expecting someone from the tender blue sky to offer them counsel: Should they buy the pike or might they be better off with a carp? And all the time they went on cursing, screeching, scolding one another, and laughing.

Vavilova tidied and swept her room. She put away her greatcoat, her sheepskin hat, and her riding boots. The noise outside was making her head thump, while inside the apartment the little Tuters were all shouting and screaming, and she felt as though she were asleep and dreaming somebody else's bad dream.

In the evening, when he came back home from work, Magazanik stopped in the doorway. He was astounded: his wife, Beila, was sitting at the table—and beside her was a large woman in an ample dress, with loose slippers on her bare feet and a bright-colored kerchief around her head. The two women were laughing quietly, talking to each other, raising and lowering their large broad hands as they sorted through a heap of tiny undershirts.

Beila had gone into Vavilova's room during the afternoon. Vavilova had been standing by the window, and Beila's sharp feminine

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eye had made out the swollen belly partly concealed by Vavilova's height.

"Begging your pardon," Beila had said resolutely, "but it seems to me that you're pregnant."

And Beila had begun fussing around her, waving her hands about, laughing and lamenting.

"Children," she said, "children—do you have any idea what misery they bring with them?" And she squeezed the youngest of the Tuters against her bosom. "Children are such a grief, such a calamity, such never-ending trouble. Every day they want to eat, and not a week passes by but one of them gets a rash and another gets a boil or comes down with a fever. And Doctor Baraban—may God grant him health—expects ten pounds of the best flour for every visit he makes."

She stroked little Sonya's head. "And every one of my lot is still living. Not one of them's going to die."

Vavilova had turned out to know nothing at all; she did not understand anything, nor did she know how to do anything. She had immediately subordinated herself to Beila's great knowledge. She had listened, and she had asked questions, and Beila, laughing with pleasure at the ignorance of this woman commissar, had told her everything she needed to know.

How to feed a baby; how to wash and powder a baby; how to stop a baby crying at night; how many diapers and babies' shirts she was going to need; the way newborn babies can scream and scream until they're quite beside themselves; the way they turn blue and your heart almost bursts from fear that your child is about to die; the best way to cure the runs; what causes diaper rash; how one day a teaspoon will make a knocking sound against a child's gums and you know that it's started to teethe.

A complex world with its own laws and customs, its own joys and sorrows.

It was a world about which Vavilova knew nothing—and Beila indulgently, like an elder sister, had initiated her into it.

"Get out from under our feet!" she had yelled at the children.

"Out you go into the yard—quick march!" The moment they were alone in the room, Beila had lowered her voice to a mysterious whisper and begun telling Vavilova about giving birth. Oh no, childbirth was no simple matter—far from it. And like an old soldier talking to a new recruit, Beila had told Vavilova about the great joys and torments of labor.

"Childbirth," she had said. "You think it's child's play, like war. Bang, bang—and there's an end to it. No, I'm sorry, but that's not how it is at all."

Vavilova had listened to her. This was the first time in all the months of her pregnancy that she had met someone who spoke of the unfortunate accident that had befallen her as if it were a happy event, as if it were the most important and necessary thing in her life.

Discussions, now including Magazanik, continued into the evening. There was no time to lose. Immediately after supper, Magazanik took a candle, went up into the attic, and with much clattering brought down a metal cradle and a little tub for bathing the new person.

"Have no fears, comrade Commissar," he said. He was laughing and his eyes were shining. "You're joining a thriving business."

"Shut your mouth, you rascal!" said his wife. "No wonder they call you an ignorant Tatar."

That night Vavilova lay in her bed. The dense smells no longer felt stifling, as they had during the previous night. She was used to them now; she was not even aware of them. She no longer wanted to have to think about anything.

It seemed to her that there were horses nearby and that she could hear them neighing. She glimpsed a long row of horses' heads; the horses were all chestnut and each had a white blaze on its forehead. The horses were constantly moving, nodding, snorting, baring their teeth. She remembered the battalion; she remembered Kirpichov, the political officer of the Second Company. There was a lull in the fighting at present. Who would give the soldiers their political

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talks? Who would tell them about the July days? The quartermaster should be hauled over the coals for this delay in the issue of boots. Once they had boots, the soldiers could make themselves footcloths. There were a lot of malcontents in the second company, especially that curly-headed fellow who was always singing songs about the Don. Vavilova yawned and closed her eyes. The battalion had gone somewhere far, far away, into the pink corridor of the dawn, between damp ricks of hay. And her thoughts about it were somehow unreal.

It gave an impatient push with its little hoofs. Vavilova opened her eyes and sat up in bed.

"A boy or a girl?" she asked out loud.

And all of a sudden her heart felt large and warm. Her heartbeats were loud and resonant.

"A boy or a girl?"

In the afternoon she went into labor.

"Oy!" she screamed hoarsely, sounding more like a peasant woman than a commissar. The pain was sharp, and it penetrated everywhere.

Beila helped her back to her bed. Little Syoma ran off merrily to fetch the midwife.

Vavilova was clutching Beila's hand. She was speaking quickly and quietly: "It's started, Beila. I'd thought it would be another ten days. It's started, Beila."

Then the pains stopped, and she thought she'd been wrong to send for the midwife.

But half an hour later the pains began again. Vavilova's tan now seemed separate from her, like a mask; underneath it her face had gone white. She lay there with her teeth clenched. It was as if she were thinking about something tormenting and shameful, as if, any minute now, she would jump up and scream, "What have I done! What have I gone and done!" And then, in her despair, she would hide her face in her hands.

The children kept peeping into the room. Their blind grandmother was by the stove, boiling a large saucepan of water. Alarmed

by the look of anguish on Vavilova's face, Beila kept looking toward the street door. At last the midwife arrived. Her name was Rosalia Samoilovna. She was a stocky woman with a red face and close-cropped hair. Soon the whole house was filled by her piercing, cantankerous voice. She shouted at Beila, at the children, at the old grandmother. Everyone began bustling about. The Primus stove in the kitchen began to hum. The children began dragging the table and chairs out of the room. Looking as if she were trying to put out a fire, Beila was hurriedly mopping the floor. Rosalia Samoilovna was driving the flies away with a towel. Vavilova watched her and for a moment thought they were in the divisonal headquarters and that the army commander had just arrived. He too was stocky, red-faced, and cantankerous, and he used to show up at times when the Poles had suddenly broken through the front line, when everyone was reading communiqués, whispering, and exchanging anxious looks as though a dead body or someone mortally ill were lying in the room with them. And the army commander would slash through this web of mystery and silence. He would curse, laugh, and shout out orders: What did he care about supply trains that had been cut off or entire regiments that had been surrounded?

Vavilova subordinated herself to Rosalia Samoilovna's powerful voice. She answered her questions; she turned onto her back or her side; she did everything she was told. Now and then her mind clouded. The walls and the ceiling lost their outlines; they were breaking up and moving in on her like waves. The midwife's loud voice would bring her back to herself. Once again she would see Rosalia Samoilovna's red, sweating face and the ends of the white kerchief tied over her hair. Her mind was empty of thoughts. She wanted to howl like a wolf; she wanted to bite the pillow. Her bones were cracking and breaking apart. Her forehead was covered by a sticky, sickly sweat. But she did not cry out; she just ground her teeth and, convulsively jerking her head, gasped in air.

Sometimes the pain went away, as if it had never been there at all, and she would look around in amazement, listening to the noise of the market, astonished by a glass on a stool or a picture on the wall.

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When the child, desperate for life, once again began fighting its way out, she felt not only terror of the pain to come but also an uncertain joy: there was no getting away from this, so let it be quick.

Rosalia Samoilovna said quietly to Beila, "If you think I'd wish it upon myself to be having my first child at the age of thirty-six, then you're wrong, Beila."

Vavilova had not been able to make out the words, but it frightened her that Rosalia Samoilovna was speaking so quietly.

"What?" she asked. "Am I going to die?"

She did not hear Rosalia Samoilovna's answer. As for Beila, she was looking pale and lost. Standing in the doorway, shrugging her shoulders, she was saying, "Oy, oy, who needs all this? Who needs all this suffering? She doesn't need it. Nor does the child. Nor does the father, drat him. Nor does God in his heaven. Whose clever idea was it to torment us like this?"

The birth took many hours.

When he got back from work, Magazanik sat on the front steps, as anxious as if it were not Vavilova but his own Beila who was giving birth. The twilight thickened; lights appeared in the windows. Jews were coming back from the synagogue, their prayer garments rolled up under their arms. In the moonlight the empty marketplace and the little streets and houses seemed beautiful and mysterious. Red Army men in riding breeches, their spurs jingling, were walking along the brick pavements. Young girls were nibbling sunflower seeds, laughing as they looked at the soldiers. One of them was gabbling: "And I was eating sweets and throwing the wrappers at him, eating sweets and tossing the wrappers at him . . ."

"Yes," Magazanik said to himself. "It's like in the old tale . . . So little work to do in the house that she had to go and buy herself a clutch of piglets. So few cares of my own that I have to have a whole partisan brigade giving birth in my house." All of a sudden he pricked up his ears and stood up. Inside the house he had heard a hoarse male voice. The oaths and curses this voice was shouting were so foul that Magazanik could only shake his head and spit. The

voice was Vavilova's. Crazed with pain, and in the last throes of labor, she was wrestling with God, with woman's accursed lot.

"Yes," said Magazanik. "You can tell it's a commissar giving birth. The strongest words I've ever heard from my own dear Beila are 'Oy, Mama! Oy, Mama! Oy, dearest Mama of mine!' "

Rosalia Samoilovna smacked the newborn on its damp, wrinkled bottom and declared, "It's a boy!"

"What did I say!" cried Beila. Half opening the door, she cried out triumphantly, "Haim, children, it's a boy!"

And the entire family clustered in the doorway, excitedly talking to Beila. Even the blind grandmother had managed to find her way over to her son and was smiling at the great miracle. She was moving her lips; her head was shaking and trembling as she ran her numb hands over her black kerchief. She was smiling and whispering something no one could hear. The children were pushing her back from the door, but she was pressing forward, craning her neck. She wanted to hear the voice of ever-victorious life.

Vavilova was looking at the baby. She was astonished that this insignificant ball of red-and-blue flesh could have caused her such suffering.

She had imagined that her baby would be large, snub-nosed, and freckled, that he would have a shock of red hair and that he would immediately be getting up to mischief, struggling to get somewhere, calling out in a piercing voice. Instead, he was as puny as an oat stalk that had grown in a cellar. His head wouldn't stay upright; his bent little legs looked quite withered as they twitched about; his pale blue eyes seemed quite blind; and his squeals were barely audible. If you opened the door too suddenly, he might be extinguished—like the thin, bent little candle that Beila had placed above the edge of the cupboard.

And although the room was as hot as a bathhouse, she stretched out her arms and said, "But he's cold—give him to me!" The little person was chirping, moving his head from side to side. Vavilova watched him through narrowed eyes, barely daring to move. "Eat,

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eat, my little son," she said, and she began to cry. "My son, my little son," she murmured—and the tears welled up in her eyes and, one after another, ran down her tanned cheeks until they disappeared into the pillow.

She remembered *him*, the taciturn one, and she felt a sharp maternal ache—a deep pity for both father and son. For the first time, she wept for the man who had died in combat near Korosten: never would this man see his own son.

And this little one, this helpless one, had been born without a father. Afraid he might die of cold, she covered him with the blanket.

Or maybe she was weeping for some other reason. Rosalia Samoilovna, at least, seemed to think so. After lighting a cigarette and letting the smoke out through the little ventilation pane, she said, "Let her cry, let her cry. It calms the nerves better than any bromide. All my mothers cry after giving birth."

Two days after the birth, Vavilova got up from her bed. Her strength was returning to her; she walked about a lot and helped Beila with the housework. When there was no one around, she quietly sang songs to the little person. This little person was now called Alyosha, Alyoshenka, Alyosha . . .

"You wouldn't believe it," Beila said to her husband. "That Russian woman's gone off her head. She's already rushed to the doctor with him three times. I can't so much as open a door in the house: he might catch a cold, or he's got a fever, or we might wake him up. In a word, she's turned into a good Jewish mother."

"What do you expect?" replied Magazanik. "Is a woman going to turn into a man just because she wears a pair of leather breeches?" And he shrugged his shoulders and closed his eyes.

A week later, Kozyrev and his chief of staff came to visit Vavilova. They smelled of leather, tobacco, and horse sweat. Alyosha was sleeping in his cradle, protected from the flies by a length of gauze. Creaking deafeningly, like a pair of brand-new leather boots, the two men approached the cradle and looked at the sleeper's thin little face. It was twitching. The movements it made—although no

more than little movements of skin—imparted to it a whole range of different expressions: sorrow, anger, and then a smile.

The soldiers exchanged glances.

"Yes," said Kozyrev.

"No doubt about it," said the chief of staff.

And they sat down on two chairs and began to talk. The Poles had gone on the offensive. Our forces were retreating. Temporarily, of course. The Fourteenth Army was regrouping at Zhmerinka. Divisions were coming up from the Urals. The Ukraine would soon be ours. In a month or so there would be a breakthrough, but right now the Poles were causing trouble.

Kozyrev swore.

"Sh!" said Vavilova. "Don't shout or you'll wake him."

"Yes, we've been given a bloody nose," said the chief of staff.

"You do talk in a silly way," said Vavilova. In a pained voice she added, "I wish you'd stop smoking. You're puffing away like a steam engine."

The soldiers suddenly began to feel bored. Kozyrev yawned. The chief of staff looked at his watch and said, "It's time we were on our way to Bald Hill. We don't want to be late."

"I wonder where that gold watch came from," Vavilova thought crossly.

"Well, Klavdiya, we must say goodbye to you!" said Kozyrev. He got to his feet and went on: "I've given orders for you to be delivered a sack of flour, some sugar, and some fatback. A cart will come around later today."

The two men went out into the street. The little Magazaniks were all standing around the horses. Kozyrev grunted heavily as he clambered up. The chief of staff clicked his tongue and leaped into the saddle.

When they got to the corner, the two men abruptly, as though by prior agreement, pulled on the reins and stopped.

"Yes," said Kozyrev.

"No doubt about it," said the chief of staff. They burst into laughter. Whipping their horses, they galloped off to Bald Hill.

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The two-wheeled cart arrived in the evening. After dragging the provisions inside, Magazanik went into Vavilova's room and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "What do you make of this, comrade Vavilova? We've got news—the brother-in-law of Tsesarsky the cobbler has just come to the workshop." He looked around and, as if apologizing for something, said in a tone of disbelief, "The Poles are in Chudnov, and Chudnov's only twenty-five miles away."

Beila came in. She had overheard some of this, and she said resolutely, "There's no two ways about it—the Poles will be here tomorrow. Or maybe it'll be the Austrians or the Galicians. Anyway, whoever it is, you can stay here with us. And they've brought you enough food—may the Lord be praised—for the next three months."

Vavilova said nothing. For once in her life she did not know what to do.

"Beila," she began, and fell silent.

"I'm not afraid," said Beila. "Why would I be afraid? I can manage five like Alyosha—no trouble at all. But whoever heard of a mother abandoning a ten-day-old baby?"

All through the night there were noises outside the window: the neighing of horses, the knocking of wheels, loud exclamations, angry voices. The supply carts were moving from Shepetovka to Kazatin.

Vavilova sat by the cradle. Her child was asleep. She looked at his little yellow face. Really, nothing very much was going to happen. Kozyrev had said that they would be back in a month. That was exactly the length of time she was expecting to be on leave. But what if she were cut off for longer? No, that didn't frighten her, either.

Once Alyosha was a bit stronger, they'd find their way across the front line.

Who was going to harm them—a peasant woman with a babe in arms? And Vavilova imagined herself walking through the countryside early on a summer's morning. She had a colored kerchief on her head, and Alyosha was looking all around and stretching out his little hands. How good it all felt! In a thin voice she began to sing, "Sleep, my little son, sleep!" And, as she was rocking the cradle, she dozed off.

In the morning the market was as busy as ever. The people, though, seemed especially excited. Some of them, watching the unbroken chain of supply carts, were laughing joyfully. But then the carts came to an end. Now there were only people. Standing by the town gates were just ordinary townsfolk—the "civilian population" of decrees issued by commandants. Everybody was looking around all the time, exchanging excited whispers. Apparently the Poles had already taken Pyatka, a shtetl only ten miles away. Magazanik had not gone out to work. Instead, he was sitting in Vavilova's room, philosophizing for all he was worth.

An armored car rumbled past in the direction of the railway station. It was covered in a thick layer of dust—as if the steel had gone gray from exhaustion and too many sleepless nights.

"To be honest with you," Magazanik was saying, "this is the best time of all for us townsfolk. One lot has left—and the next has yet to arrive. No requisitions, no 'voluntary contributions,' no pogroms."

"It's only in the daytime that he's so smart," said Beila. "At night, when there are bandits on every street and the whole town's in uproar, he sits there looking like death. All he can do is shake with terror."

"Don't interrupt," Magazanik said crossly, "when I'm talking to someone."

Every now and then he would slip out to the street and come back with the latest news. The Revolutionary Committee had been evacuated during the night, the district Party Committee had gone next, and the military headquarters had left in the morning. The station was empty. The last army train had already gone.

Vavilova heard shouts from the street. An airplane in the sky! She went to the window. The plane was high up, but she could see the white-and-red roundels on its wings. It was a Polish reconnaissance plane. It made a circle over the town and flew off toward the station. And then, from the direction of Bald Hill, cannons began firing.

The first sound they heard was that of the shells; they howled by like a whirlwind. Next came the long sigh of the cannons. And

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then, a few seconds later, from beyond the level crossing—a joyful peal of explosions. It was the Bolsheviks—they were trying to slow the Polish advance. Soon the Poles were responding in kind; shells began to land in the town.

The air was torn by deafening explosions. Bricks were crumbling. Smoke and dust were dancing over the flattened wall of a building. The streets were silent, severe, and deserted—now no more substantial than sketches. The quiet after each shell burst was terrifying. And from high in a cloudless sky the sun shone gaily down on a town that was like a spread-eagled corpse.

The townsfolk were all in their cellars and basements. Their eyes closed, barely conscious, they were holding their breath or letting out low moans of fear.

Everyone, even the little children, knew that this bombardment was what is known as an "artillery preparation" and that there would be another forty or fifty explosions before the soldiers entered the town. And then—as everyone knew—it would become unbelievably quiet until, all of a sudden, clattering along the broad street from the level crossing, a reconnaissance patrol galloped up. And, dying of fear and curiosity, everyone would be peeping out from behind their gates, peering through gaps in shutters and curtains. Drenched in sweat, they would begin to tiptoe out to the street.

The patrol would enter the main square. The horses would prance and snort; the riders would call out to one another in a marvelously simple human language, and their leader, delighted by the humility of this conquered town now lying flat on its back, would yell out in a drunken voice, fire a revolver shot into the maw of the silence, and get his horse to rear.

And then, pouring in from all sides, would come cavalry and infantry. From one house to another would rush tired dusty men in blue greatcoats—thrifty peasants, good-natured enough yet capable of murder and greedy for the town's hens, boots, and towels.

Everybody knew all this, because the town had already changed hands fourteen times. It had been held by Petlyura, by Denikin, by the Bolsheviks, by Galicians and Poles, by Tyutyunik's brigands

and Marusya's brigands, and by the crazy Ninth Regiment that was a law unto itself. And it was the same story each time.

"They're singing!" shouted Magazanik. "They're singing!"

And, forgetting his fear, he ran out onto the front steps. Vavilova followed him. After the stuffiness of the dark room, it was a joy to breathe in the light and warmth of the summer day. She had been feeling the same about the Poles as she had felt about the pains of labor: they were bound to come, so let them come quick. If the explosions scared her, it was only because she was afraid they would wake Alyosha; the whistling shells troubled her no more than flies—she just brushed them aside.

"Hush now, hush now," she had sung over the cradle. "Don't go waking Alyosha."

She was trying not to think. Everything, after all, had been decided. In a month's time, either the Bolsheviks would be back or she and Alyosha would cross the front line to join them.

"What on earth's going on?" said Magazanik. "Look at that!"

Marching along the broad empty street, toward the level crossing from which the Poles should be about to appear, was a column of young Bolshevik cadets. They were wearing white canvas trousers and tunics.

"Ma-ay the re-ed banner embo-ody the workers' ide-e-als," they sang, drawing out the words almost mournfully.

They were marching toward the Poles.

Why? Whatever for?

Vavilova gazed at them. And suddenly it came back to her: Red Square, vast as ever, and several thousand workers who had volunteered for the front, thronging around a wooden platform that had been knocked together in a hurry. A bald man, gesticulating with his cloth cap, was addressing them. Vavilova was standing not far from him.

She was so agitated that she could not take in half of what he said, even though, apart from not quite being able to roll his *r*'s, he had a clear voice. The people standing beside her were almost gasping as they listened. An old man in a padded jacket was crying.

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Just what had happened to her on that square, beneath the dark walls, she did not know. Once, at night, she had wanted to talk about it to *him*, to her taciturn one. She had felt he would understand. But she had been unable to get the words out . . . And as the men made their way from the square to the Bryansk Station, *this* was the song they had been singing.

Looking at the faces of the singing cadets, she lived through once again what she had lived through two years before.

The Magazaniks saw a woman in a sheepskin hat and a greatcoat running down the street after the cadets, slipping a cartridge clip into her large gray Mauser as she ran.

Not taking his eyes off her, Magazanik said, "Once there were people like that in the Bund. Real human beings, Beila. Call us human beings? No, we're just manure."

Alyosha had woken up. He was crying and kicking about, trying to kick off his swaddling clothes. Coming back to herself, Beila said to her husband, "Listen, the baby's woken up. You'd better light the Primus—we must heat up some milk."

The cadets disappeared around a turn in the road.

A SMALL LIFE

MOSCOW spends the last ten days of April preparing for May Day. The cornices of buildings and the little iron railings along boulevards are repainted, and in the evenings mothers throw up their hands in despair at the sight of their sons' trousers and coats. On all the city's squares carpenters merrily saw up planks that still smell of pine resin and the damp of the forest. Supplies managers use their directors' cars to collect great heaps of red cloth.

Visitors to different government institutions find that their requests all meet with the same answer: "Yes, but let's leave this until after the holiday!"

Lev Sergeyevich Orlov was standing on a street corner with his colleague Timofeyev. Timofeyev was saying, "You're being an old woman, Lev Sergeyevich. We could go to a beer hall or a restaurant. We could just wander about and watch the crowds. So what if it upsets your wife? You're an old woman, the most complete and utter old woman!"

But Lev Sergeyevich said goodbye and went on his way. Morose by nature, he used to say of himself, "I'm made in such a way that I see what is tragic, even when it's covered by rose petals."

And Lev Sergeyevich truly did see tragedy everywhere.

Even now as he made his way through the crowds he was thinking how awful it must feel to be stuck in a hospital during these days of merriment, how miserable these days must be for pharmacists, engine drivers, and train crews—people who have to work on the First of May.

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